

SOBRE SEGUIR REGRAS E O DEVER DE REFLEXÃO PERPÉTUA

ON RULE-FOLLOWING AND THE DUTY OF PERPETUAL REFLECTION

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Resumo: O principal objetivo deste texto é argumentar em prol da alegação de McDowell de que temos uma obrigação perpétua de refletir sobre o ajuste entre nossa visão de mundo e a realidade. Esta obrigação está atrelada à recusa da possibilidade do que ele chama de uma “visão lateral” da realidade. O argumento mais forte contra esta possibilidade é baseado nas considerações de Wittgenstein sobre seguir regras. Reconstruí-lo lançará luz sobre as alegações de McDowell sobre *segunda* natureza, porém, mais importante, tornará disponível uma concepção de objetividade que tem consequências interessantes sobre a conexão entre sensibilidade e racionalidade – mais especificamente, o argumento implica que nosso desenvolvimento como seres racionais e cognitivos é inseparável do desenvolvimento de nossa sensibilidade particular.

Palavras-chave: Seguir Regras. Objetividade, Racionalidade. Sensibilidade. Segunda Natureza.

Abstract: The main goal of this paper is to argue for McDowell's claim that we have a perpetual obligation to reflect upon the adjustment of our world-view to reality. This obligation is tied to the refusal of the possibility of what he calls a “sideways-on view” on reality. The most forceful argument against this possibility is based on Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations. Reconstructing it will shed some light on McDowell's claims about *second nature*, but, more importantly, it will make available a conception of objectivity which has interesting consequences regarding the connection between sensibility and rationality - more specifically, it entails that our development as rational and cognitive beings is inseparable from the development of our particular sensibility.

Keywords: Rule-Following. Objectivity. Rationality. Sensibility. Second Nature.

Introduction

In his *Mind and World* (2000) McDowell puts forward the claim that the content of experience is conceptual. That, he argues, is the only way to account for the role experience is supposed to play in the justification of our empirical judgments. If experience does not have such normative relations with our judgments, then reality cannot rationally constrain our thought about the world. But, if experience does have conceptual content in such a way as to provide justification to our empirical judgments, then, when experience is not misleading, it puts us in contact with features of reality – the content of a veridical experience is just a feature of the world; the world itself is

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conceptually structured.

This seems to expose McDowell to the accusation of Idealism (according to Ayers, 2004, for instance, there is a tension between McDowell's thesis and his denial of idealism). His adversaries may protest that his positions “does not genuinely acknowledge how reality is independent of our thinking” (McDowell, 2000, p.26). The accusation that his position embodies an “arrogant anthropocentrism, a baseless confidence that the world is completely within the reach of our powers of thinking” (McDowell, 2000, p.39-40) is just another face of the same objection. How can we be so sure that reality is completely within the reach of our system of concepts if not because reality is dependent of our thinking? McDowell answers is that:

There is no guarantee that the world is completely within the reach of a system of concepts and conceptions as it stands at some particular moment in its historical development. Exactly not; that is why the obligation to reflect is perpetual. [...] the idea of an end to inquiry is no part of the position I am recommending. (McDowell, 2000, p.40)

We have a standing obligation to adjust our world-view to reality – this is the claim I want to get a better understanding of.

McDowell's answer to that challenge, I shall argue, depends on the refusal of the possibility of what he calls a “sideways-on view” on reality. Our first task is to clarify both what is the sideways-on view and present an argument to refuse it. This task will be undertaken in section I. The clearest exposition of the reasons to reject the sideways-on view is found in McDowell's writings in *Moral Philosophy*, especially his *Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following* (2002), and that is where we will start. The argument relies on Wittgenstein rule-following considerations and it will shed some light on McDowell's somewhat obscure claim that the development of “second nature” can “open our eyes” to features of reality, reasons included (2000, p.79 and 84). But, more importantly, it will make available a new conception of objectivity which has interesting consequences regarding the relation between sensibility (in a suitably wide sense) and rationality. These consequences will be explored in section II.

I. Sideways-on view, Objectivity and Rule-Following

We find ourselves always already engaging with the world within a certain conceptual outlook. We usually, so to speak, see the world through our concepts – as if they were lens. But, if we are not to take for granted the capacity of our current conceptual system to embrace reality, we better have a way of assessing its adequacy and adjusting it to the world. We may be tempted to picture the systems' adjustment to the world from sideways on: instead of seeing the world through our concepts, we try to bring both into view at once: here the conceptual system, there the world (to use McDowell's words, 2000, p.35), and compare one to the other. That way we could ascertain the correspondence of our concepts to reality. Surely that would require that we abandon our particular outlook and adopt a point of view that abstracts from our idiosyncratic or parochial way of seeing the world, but that, we may be inclined to say, is just fine: after all, our particular standpoint may include elements that distort our view or occludes some features of reality. The picture here is this: by surveying reality from a maximally abstract standpoint we can identify some regularities, and concepts to which correspond no such regularity should be dismissed as failing to capture any genuine feature of reality. This is the view McDowell wants to reject.

The sideways-on view embodies a conception of objectivity (I'll call it the “narrow conception of objectivity”, following Crary, 2007, p.18): for any concept C, if C is the concept of a genuine feature of reality, then C can be appropriately projected from the abstract outlook. Part of what constitutes our particular outlook is our set of dispositions or propensities to make certain claims, to react in a certain fashion or to respond affectively in certain circumstances. According to the narrow conception, a concept of a genuine feature of reality could be projected in abstraction of all of these dispositions and propensities. It should be possible to understand why the items the concept group belong together without sharing with the community which actually uses the term any particular concern, sensibility or interest². McDowell (2002) exploits

² The narrow conception of objectivity underlies the idea, typical of modern thought, that secondary qualities are not genuine features of the world. Bernard Williams presents it in his *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (1978, especially p.241 and ff). According to him, we must distinguish between reality and appearance just because the recipient of appearances occupies a parochial outlook. Our special perceptual apparatus, which allows us to see colors, constitutes a parochial outlook, as does our shared “human tastes and interests” (1978, p.243), which allows us to find something amusing, for instance. In order to access reality as it is in itself we must transcend these parochial outlooks. The suggestion is that “there are possible descriptions of the world using concepts which are not peculiarly ours, and not peculiarly relative to our experience” (1978, p.244). A concept that cannot be projected from a point of

Wittgenstein considerations about rule-following to refuse the narrow conception.

Consider a concept we are ordinarily inclined to take as a concept of a genuine feature of reality, say, the concept of round. Our use of “round” is extremely regular: we agree in applying and refraining from applying it, we agree about which are the difficult cases; we teach our kids to use the term by showing them instances of the concept and we hope (and usually our hopes pay off) that our pupils will be able to project the concept on new cases (even to absolutely new cases, not just new cases for the pupil) the same way we do. How is that possible? It is tempting to say: when we teach someone to use a concept what we do is to equip her with a projection rule. If the concept in question is a concept of a genuine feature of reality, then the rule tracks a feature of reality – the concept's application pattern is intelligible to an occupant of the abstract standpoint that has mastered the rule. We could say: “when we teach someone how to use a concept of a genuine feature of reality, we provide a rule that puts the person on the rail of reality” (the rail image comes from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, §218).

The picture here is the following: we sweep the world from the abstract perspective, discriminating every instance of “round” we come across; if we mark each instance with a dot and then connect all of them, we'll have a trail; every correct judgment to the effect that something is round runs along that trail; since it's drawn from the abstract perspective, this trail is objective in the sense endorsed by the narrow conception. In order to correctly project the concept all the pupil has to do is to keep on following the trail – the cases with which he already came across are the visible section of the trail, but it is already extended beyond the reach of our sight. The idea the picture of rails capture is this: the appropriate projection of the concept is already laid out in front of us; we just have to make sure our use of the concept is aligned with it.

To extend a numeric series seems to be the paradigmatic case of rule-following on those terms: the mathematical rule to extend the series seems to be the best possible candidate to a rule manageable from the abstract standpoint and it seems that it is beyond doubt that there is a objectively correct way to extend the series. Wittgenstein (PI, §185) offers the example of a student that is asked to extend the numeric series {2,

view which abstracts from our parochial outlook cannot be the concept of a genuine feature of reality. That's the case with concepts of secondary qualities which are, thus, appearances of reality (1978, p.245). See Crary (2007, p.11-19) for a defense of the claim that the narrow conception of objectivity is presupposed by several participants in the discussion about the appropriate characterization of moral judgments. See also McDowell (2002b, p.117-122).

4, 6, 8...} generated by successive applications of the rule “add two”. Someone who has been exposed to our standard mathematical education has an immediate inclination to continue the series by adding the number 10. We simply do that, without calculating or any kind of explicit justification of this movement. Now, according to the narrow conception, it must be possible to extend this series from a standpoint that abstract from the particular propensities and reactions that characterize the particular outlook of someone educated in mathematics in our way. Someone who extend the series from the abstract perspective cannot count on our immediate propensity to extend the series by adding 10, 12, 14 and so on. This person must be in possession of a explicitly formulated rule that determines how the series should be extended. But how can someone follow the rule “add two” from the abstract outlook? Well, this person knows that the partial series presented to her was generated by the successive application of the rule in question. She could, therefore, determine which mathematical function accounts for the series and go on applying the same function. However, there is a number of functions that could account for the presented series and yet prescribe that it be extended differently. For instance, when n denotes the position of a number in the series, both the function “ $2n$ ” and the function “ $2n$ (if $n \leq 500$) and $2n+2$ (if $n > 500$)” account for the series but prescribe that it be extended differently. If we follow the former function the series will be expanded in the usual way and if we follow the latter function the series will be extended incorrectly: {2, 4, 6, 8, ..., 1000, 1004, 1006, 1008, ...}. We take “add two” as prescribing that we extend the series according to the function “ $2n$ ”, but this also is a propensity that constitute our particular outlook. If this immediate propensity is not available to someone in the abstract outlook, what would lead someone to choose one function over the other?

If someone expanded the series as prescribed by the second more complex function, the series would differ from the correct one in that it would skip the number 1002. If we were supervising this exercise, we would tell our pupil that in the step from 1000 to 1004 she did not reiterated the same operation she was repeating so far. “You should have added two, as you have been doing so far!” we could say. But if this person had interpreted “add two” as standing for the second function she would not comprehend our protest: “That is exactly what I did!”. Suppose we were to revise with this person all the examples, explanations and exercises we usually appeal to in teaching our kids how to extend the series; supposed yet that this person would, nevertheless, continue to claim that in the step from 1000 to 1004 she was indeed doing the same

thing she had done in all of the previous steps. Wittgenstein suggests (PI, §185) that we could say of this person that she comprehends the command “add two” in a different way than we do – the case would be similar to that of someone who naturally reacts to the gesture of pointing to something by looking in the direction that goes from the tip of the index finger to the wrist, not from the wrist to the tip of the finger. But then we are no longer speaking of someone who occupies the abstract perspective, but of someone who occupies a particular standpoint, characterized by the propensity to certain reactions and responses – it just is the case that this particular outlook is inappropriate to the practice of mathematics (or to the practice of pointing to things).

Someone may argue that a person who chooses to extend the numeric series according to the more complex function is interpreting the rule incorrectly. But then, in order for rules to be useful in the guidance of our behavior, what we need is something that regulates the way we interpret rules? If I'm free to interpret the rule as I will then anything I do can be made compatible with the rule as long as I provide a suitable interpretation. But that would not be enough to connect the rule to my behavior. In Wittgenstein's words (PI, §198), the interpretation hangs in the air with what it interprets. That the rule 'hangs in the air' means that it is like a gear disconnected from the mechanism of which it is a component – as such it does no work at all. That the interpretation hangs in the air with the rule means that it is not sufficient to reconnect the gear to the mechanism – even an interpreted rule cannot by itself guide our behavior.

What else is needed? Consider a signpost (PI, §198) – how is it connected to my action of taking the path it points? For one thing, I have been trained to react in a particular way to signs. Without the background of an appropriate education, I would not go by the signpost. If we have no immediate response to the rule, then it is completely idle in the guidance of our behavior, whatever interpretation we give it. The rule “add two” disconnected from the set of responses and reactions that constitute our mathematical outlook hangs in the air. Interpreting it one way or another does nothing to reconnect it to the mechanism of our behavior. To interpret it is nothing but to provide a new formulation of the rule, and these formulations will themselves be open to interpretation. If we do not react immediately to any of these formulations, this will be the first step on an infinite regress; if we do react immediately to some formulation of the rule, then it is this reaction that is doing all the work in guiding our behavior and this is what determines how we understand the rule.

The postulation of the apprehension of the meaning of a rule from an

abstract standpoint fails to explain why we project our concepts as we do. Projective regularity is due to the sharing of propensities to responses and reactions (many of which are acquired or shaped in the process of our education) that constitute the standpoint in which our concepts are used. That we project our concepts the same way is the result of our sharing of a form of life - of interest, concerns, of modes of affective reaction, of a sense of similitude, a sense of humor etc (to paraphrase Cavell, 1988, p.52).

That we agree about what is round (that we project this concept to the same instances) is no less dependent of our particular perspective than is our agreement about what is funny, for instance. If we abstract from our particular outlook, as much as it is impossible to tell apart what's funny and what's not, it is impossible to distinguish between what's round and what's not.

If we take “our sensibility” to refer to the set of our propensities to react in a certain way (be it an affective response or a behavioral one), we may not conceive of our sensibility as an input-output function – as a black box which receives as input the identification of a particular feature of reality and provides as output certain response. Our particular sensibility is an indispensable component of our capacity to access any genuine feature of reality. The narrow conception of objectivity that aims at excluding from the hall of the concepts of genuine features of reality any concept that can only be projected from a particular outlook ends up excluding any concept at all. It must, therefore, be rejected.

2. Reason and Sensibility

The rule-following argument gives a clear sense to the idea that we cannot step out of our conceptual practices to make sure they correspond to reality – that is, we cannot adopt a sideways-on view on the world and our conceptual system. Mastery of a concept can only be ascribed to someone who can project it appropriately. The attempt to operate with our concepts outside of the standpoint in which they are usually applied results, then, in the abandonment of the conditions of mastery for the concept (the dispositions and propensities to reactions that characterize the outlook of the practice in which the concept has its home). No concept whatsoever can be projected in those circumstances. The attempt to externally validate our conceptual practices cannot succeed. But why do we feel this need? Why are we not comfortable with the idea that

no external validation can be provided?

To deny the narrow conception of objectivity commits one to the idea that there can be concepts of genuine features of reality that can only be projected from an standpoint characterized by certain sensibility. Consequently, there may be fully objective features of reality that can only be discerned by persons whose sensibility has been properly shaped. Our education opens our eyes to features of reality that were there anyway, even though these features remain inaccessible to persons who did not get an adequate education. Our development as cognitive beings, capable of accessing reality, is, therefore, inseparable of our development as affective beings (beings endowed with a particular sensibility).

This puts us in position to understand McDowell claims about second nature opening our eyes (McDowell, 2000, p.84) to features of reality. In the course of our education our natural dispositions and propensities are molded into a determinate shape – we acquire a second nature. This molding process is a integral part of our initiation into conceptual practices and it is only through it that we acquire the capacity to identify features of reality. Only through the acquisition of a second nature we can develop as cognitive beings.

Someone could object thus: “the thesis is that, in a judgment, what is the case and what is an original contribution of our form of life, our particular sensibility or second nature, cannot be disentangled. We cannot say something like 'here we were reacting to this particular feature of reality but our sensibility added this particular character to the experience'. That would demand that we were capable of sweeping reality from outside our outlook, which is not possible. So, as long as true, correct or acceptable judgments capture what is the case, it would seem that our sensibility constitutes the world accessible to us. This fly in the face of our expectation that reality is prior and independent of human activity – we would like to say that the development of our sensibility makes available features of reality that were already there, not that it constitutes those features.”

This difficulty can take the form of a threat of relativism. If what is the case and original contributions of our sensibility cannot be disentangled, then there is no common ground that can provide a base for the interaction with other forms of life. Conceptual practices connected to different moldings of our sensibility would result in concepts that are not correctly projected the same way our concepts – that is, different concepts. When confronted with these alternative conceptual practices (even if only in

thought) we want to be able to say something to back up our own conceptual system, but if we cannot take a step out of our outlook it seems we cannot but accept it as something given. Only a form of conservatism would keep us attached to our own conceptual practices.

Two points should be emphasized in response to this difficulty. First, the revision and criticism of our conceptual practices is only possible from within those very practices, but it is indeed possible and we ordinarily engage on this effort. As everything else, this form of criticism is only intelligible to those that share our outlook. But the threat of relativism introduces the following temptation: we would like to have some consideration to offer in favor of our conceptual practices that was able to constrain (once and for all) the participants of alternative conceptual practices to adopt our outlook (and the form of life that comes with it). And that would probably take the form of the claim that our conceptual practice is more finely aligned with reality. That would be to offer an external validation. If the option of adopting a sideways-on view and find out that our conceptual system is in tune with reality and that the task of critical scrutiny is concluded for good is not available, we are left with a perpetual responsibility for the critical reflection about our conceptual practices and about the form of life associated with it. If we cannot find out that our conceptual practice is in tune with reality from an external point of view, all we can do to vindicate it is to defend it from challenges that come up and there is no way to guarantee that new and unexpected challenges will arise. At least in part, it is the anxiety caused by this duty of perpetual vigilance that motivates the desire for a projection rule manageable from the abstract standpoint.

That is exactly what is at stake on McDowell's answers to the accusation of "arrogant anthropocentrism": there is no guarantee that the world is completely within the reach of our concept system as it stands at a particular moment of its historical development and for that reason there is an obligation to perpetual reflection (McDowell, 2000, p.39-40).

But even though internal criticism is possible, and we are not condemned to conservatism, we might feel secluded from communities with very different conceptual practices – and that is enough relativism. We may feel that two completely different communities could only clash, and even if this clash could result in mutual revision of the conceptual practices, and even if that could lead to convergence in conceptual system, that would be a blind, mechanistic, brute, purely causal, all but rational

process. For it to be rationally guided it would have to be possible to assess both practices against a common background – and nothing could provide that background except reality as seen from the abstract perspective.

This concern derives from an assumption about the kind of consideration that can provide cognitive gain and rational correction. This is the second point: the denial of the narrow conception of objectivity entails that even modes of discourse that do not proceed via argumentation where all the steps can be considered (or claim to be) rational inferences can contribute to our comprehension of the world and to the development of our cognitive capacities, as long as they can contribute to the shaping our sensibility, thus making available genuine features of reality unavailable so far (Crary, 2007, p.118-9, emphasizes that). And so far as it is rational to believe in what is the case, some of those forms of discourse that would traditionally be labeled “mere persuasion” can move us to rationality.

The narrow conception of objectivity carries with it a narrow conception of rationality that deems persuasive discourse incapable of rational contribution. Ascriptions of rationality aim at capturing genuine aspects of reality and as such, says the defender of the narrow conception, the development of our capacity to identify rational behaviors, inferences, lines of thought etc does not depend on the development of our sensibility. If we refuse the narrow conception of objectivity, we make room for a wider conception of rationality as well. The concept of rationality is just a concept among others and as such it can be projected only from a particular outlook. That a change in our conceptual practices or on our world-view is rational is only discernible from the particular outlook in which the concept of rationality is used and taught. To ascertain that a change due to the contact with an alternative conceptual practice is rational there is no need to access a shared background. This assessment, like any other, is possible only from our particular standpoint.

This is one of the main lessons from the rule-following considerations: our development as rational and cognitive beings is completely inseparable of our development as sensible, affective beings. Or rather, our cognitive and rational capacities, on the one hand, and our sensibility, on the other, are helplessly tangled.

Our own sensibility cannot, therefore, be seen as constituting reality – it is part of our cognitive apparatus and if a change in our conceptual practices (which necessarily involves a change in sensibility) is rational, we cannot but conclude that so far our sensibility has been distorting or occluding features of reality. The possibility of

a finer attunement between our sensibility and reality is always open. The question “how things really are?”, understood as the demand for a characterization of reality as independent of us, is always available, even though it is a question that can only be asked from our standpoint and answered by our own lights. We cannot but answer this question in the terms our sensibility allows us to operate with, but this answer is never definitive – there is no external guarantee that our answer captures reality. We can always find out that the current stage of development of our sensibility (and, thus, of our cognitive apparatus) is hiding something from us.

The difficulties we have been discussing were caused by the idea that in refusing the narrow conception of objectivity we would commit ourselves to the idea that it is not possible to disentangle in the content of a judgment what is due to reality and what is an original contribution of our particular sensibility. But now we can see this is not the case: when we judge we react to facts (or, if our judgment is false, to what we take as facts) and these facts determine the content of the judgment. We should not, though, make the mistake of supposing these facts are discernible from an abstract outlook. We cannot disentangle our capacity to access genuine features of reality from our propensity to certain reactions (our openness to facts occurs always in a particular outlook), but that does not mean that we cannot disentangle in the content of a judgment, put forward in an outlook suitable for the projection of the concepts employed, what is a response to genuine features of reality and what is added by the person idiosyncratic subjectivity. Someone can have her sensibility properly shaped so that we can ascribe her mastery of a determinate concept, even though idiosyncratic features of her subjectivity (prejudices, for instance) occasionally distort the projection of the concept in question. In this case, it should be possible to disentangle in the content of the judgment what is due to her particular subjectivity from what is a response to reality, even though that disentanglement can only be performed from a particular outlook. The very distinction between mere idiosyncratic features of a subjectivity and features of the subjectivity that constitute our sensibility can only be drawn from inside our outlook. The same goes to the determination of which idiosyncratic subjective features are tolerable (as culinary preferences) and which are not (as racial prejudice).

The defender of the narrow conception of objectivity tries to impose a choice on us: either our access to reality is possible in abstraction of our particular sensibility or our sensibility has a role in the constitution of reality. Once we realize that

the shaping of our sensibility cannot be disentangle from the development of our cognitive powers we can escape this dilemma. Our shared sensibility, our shared form of life, is not a hindrance in our search for truth nor is it a device to give rise to new features of reality. It is a condition for our access to reality - the development of our sensibility opens our eyes to features of reality that were already there. This dependence on our particular sensibility, however, precludes the external validation of our conceptual system and for that reason we cannot escape from the need for perpetual critical reflection about our world-view and the form of life that comes with it.

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